The Agrarian Scene

Stagnating Agriculture

Colonialism became a fetter on India's agricultural and industrial development. Agriculture stagnated and even deteriorated over the years, especially during the first half of the 20th century when the full impact of colonialism began to be felt. Per capita agricultural production declined at a rate of 0.72 per cent per year during 1911-1941 (Blyn, 1966). The situation was worse insofar as per capita foodgrain output was concerned: during the same period, it declined by 29 per cent, i.e., at a rate of 1.14 per cent per year. Even though the per capita non-foodgrain output grew by 14 per cent, it failed to make up for the decline in foodgrain output (Blyn, 1966).[3]

The per capita consumption was much below the minimum recommended by dieticians, 460 gms against the recommended 510-520 gms. Even this low level of consumption required massive importation. From 1948 to 1951, imports of cereals tended to increase: in 1951, they rose to 4.7 million tonnes, which was about 10 per cent of domestic production. These and other food imports cost India more than Rs. 200 crore (in 1951) and thus, counter-balanced more than 20 per cent of her export receipts. Such a situation in a country where more than 70 per cent of the population is occupied in agriculture called for drastic action.

Whatever the absolute growth in agricultural output, it occurred mainly because of the increase in crop-acreage. The rate of increase in all-crop yield per acre was near-zero during 1911-1941. While all-crop

and food grain yields declined by 0.02 and 0.44 per cent per year, non-food grain yield went up by 1.15 per cent per year (Blyn, 1966). The increase in yield of non-food grains was basically at the cost of food grain yields, as cultivators shifted better and irrigated land and capital resources to commercial crops in order to earn cash.

Causes

(i) Regressive Organic Structure

The stagnation in agriculture is basically explained by the fact that colonialism transformed the agrarian structure in India and made it extremely regressive. As is well-known, the *zamindars* in *zamindari* areas failed to invest in land and relied on rack-renting, while the peasant proprietors fell into the clutches of the moneylenders and lost control over their lands. Sub-infeudation, tenancy and sharecropping increasingly dominated both the *zamindari* and *ryotwari* areas.[4]

(ii) Internal Drain of Capital

Agricultural surpluses were siphoned from agriculture without any *quid pro quo*, thereby subjecting it to an internal drain of capital. Throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, high land revenue demand ate into the peasant's surplus and even his subsistence. But the government spent very little on improving agriculture as was done, for instance, in Japan. The landlords, old or new, took no interest in agriculture beyond collecting rent. They found rack-rent and usury far more profitable than making productive investment in land. The moneylenders and merchants used their increasing share of agricultural surplus to intensify usury or to take possession of land to become landlords.

In many areas, a rich peasantry developed as a result of commercialisation and tenancy legislation but it too, quickly used its savings to buy land to become landlords or to turn to usury as moneylenders. One result was that no capitalist farming developed except in a few pockets. On the other hand, the vast mass of small peasants, tenants and sharecroppers had no resources or incentive to invest in the improvement of agriculture. Moreover, whatever savings

some sections of peasants were able to make over time were usually knocked off by famine, scarcity and economic depression.

(iii) Poor Technology

Another reason for the stagnation of productivity in agriculture was the near absence of change in its technological basis or its productive technique and inputs. As Blyn points out, the type of equipment used changed very little till 1941. Modern machinery was conspicuous by its absence. Improved seeds covered about 1.9 per cent of all crop-acreage in 1922-23 and 11.1 per cent in 1938-39, these being largely confined to non-food cash crops. The amount of chemical fertiliser used was insignificant and confined to its imports which averaged less than 2,000 tonnes per year during 1898-1923 and 99,452 tonnes in 1939. On the other hand, because of the decline in the proportion of cattle to acreage there was, after 1930, considerable decline in the availability of dung for fertiliser (Blyn, 1966).

As far as agricultural education was concerned, there were only nine agricultural colleges with 3,110 students in 1946 (Blyn, 1966). There was hardly any investment in terracing, flood-control, drainage and de-salinisation of soil. Irrigation was the only field in which some progress was made so that during the early 1940s, 26.7 per cent of the total cultivated area was irrigated, with government works irrigating about 15.5 per cent of the total cultivated area. An adverse factor was the increase in subdivision of landholdings into smaller sizes and fragmentation and scattering of these holdings. It is also to be noted that commercialisation did not change the unit or organisation of productive activity (e.g. capitalist farming) or lead to improved technology—only better soil and available water and other resources were diverted from food crops to commercial crops.